"What happens when violence knocks and politeness answers?" Killing the Angel at a Self-Defence Seminar in St Andrews

By Christina Chalache

DISCLAIMER:
DISCUSSIONS OF VIOLENCE AND RAPE WILL BE INCLUDED IN THIS ESSAY. IF THESE ISSUES ARE TRIGGERING IN ANY WAY, PLEASE STOP READING NOW.

The Angel in the House

"What happens when violence knocks and politeness answers?"

This is the opening line of an article written by Debra Anne Davis entitled Betrayed By the Angel (2004) describing how, ten years prior, she opened the door of her flat for a strange man who proceeded to rape her. She didn't fight back. Not because she froze, as many people do when surprised or in danger (Roelofs *et al.* 2010; Miller 2017), but because she deliberately stopped herself from shutting the door in his face, despite sensing something was wrong as soon as she saw him.

"You can't do something like that. It's rude."

And Debra wasn't rude. She was a good person. Instead, she flirted with her rapist in an attempt to sway him from killing her. Fortunately, he didn't, and she later reported the rape to the police, which isn't a common choice for the vast majority of rape victims in the U.S.A. (Kilpatrick et al. 2007; Wolitzky-Taylor *et al.* 2010; Berzofsky *et al.* 2013). The man was sentenced to 35 years in jail on a plea bargain, another rare outcome for rape cases in the U.S.A. (*ibid.*).

Why mention Debra's harrowing story? Because it played a crucial part in making me understand my ethnographic encounter in 2018 at a two-day self-defence seminar in St Andrews.

Introduction

The self-defence seminar took place at a hotel. It was taught by an instructor called Roland[1], who is part of a team of self-defence instructors from North America.

Their main philosophy, according to their website, is this:

We believe that stronger people are more fun to be around so we're on a quest to find them. And if we can't find enough strong people then it's our responsibility to make them.

Roland has close ties to a member of my martial arts club and had been invited to teach self-defence in St Andrews for the fourth year in a row. I took part in his seminar myself and, having been taught by Roland once before, I thought I had a fairly good understanding of who he was. He used to be a police officer, has years of experience with violent criminals and wanted to share his skills with the public. My initial goal, therefore, was to examine the relations between the participants of his seminar, looking particularly at the dynamic between the young, female university students and the older male participants, most of whom run martial arts clubs of their own.

Instead, it was the structure of the seminar that spiked my interest. Before conducting my fieldwork, I knew just about what the reader of this article knows from only having read the Introduction above; I had

Here is a meme they posted on Facebook entitled: "That is the team".

seen a few posts on Roland's Facebook page about his team of instructors and, a year prior, I had heard him tell dramatic tales from his time as a police officer (tales I had since forgotten).

I hope, with his information in mind (which is the information I myself had before conducting my fieldwork), that the narration of what took place at the seminar will clarify why I drew the conclusion that I did about the self-defence seminar.

Introducing the Instructor: Roland

We went to a pub with Roland on the evening between the first and second day. Roland was having his fourth drink when I asked him a question about how he relates to female students. He looked down. To him, he said, the important thing to acknowledge and be honest about as an instructor is that you will never know how your students feel. By virtue of being someone else, you would not have shared their exact same life experiences. He then asked me if I had read an article called Betrayed By the Angel. I told him that I had not, but I noted the title down at his behest.

The conversation moved on to more private matters. I asked him about his wife. He told me that she was the love of his life, but that he had never wanted to marry her (they ended up marrying for practical reasons). I asked him why. He said he always wanted her to feel like she could leave him if she could. My mind immediately went back to the very beginning of the seminar that morning.

Earlier that day, myself and the other participants in the seminar had all been standing in a semi-circle facing Roland. There were ten of us, which is a small group, but Roland prefers it that way. It gives him more time with each student. Roland himself was standing with his back to the wall. The doors to the hallway were behind us. I'd wondered at the time if Roland had purposefully not placed himself between us and the exit. I had the same thought again at the pub.

"I'm not trying to be the big predator in the room," Roland told me during a Skype interview a few weeks later[2]. Roland is of average height, stocky and strong. He has grey hair, his voice is soft, but despite his kind eyes he has a firm gaze. "A lot of the times I'll sit down first, makes me shorter than anyone else in the room, lowers the status. In that first meeting I want them to know that I'm just a guy."

A Discussion About Violence

Roland deals with the "micro". That's what he said during lunch the second day of the seminar. While others spend much of their time discussing violence in abstract terms, he focuses on the individual experience. His job, he said, was to help us, his students, to not get hurt, to help them get strong, to help us fight back if we were ever attacked – and, most importantly: he wants his students to know that they are worth fighting for.

"'Stop fighting!' he growled at me. Ooh, that pissed me off! 'I'm not fighting!' I sassed back at him. And I wasn't. How dare he! Accuse me, I mean. Of fighting."

Hurting someone is generally not considered "just" or "good". This is a moral standing reflected in the legal system of most countries in the world, where acts of violence are only permissible only in self-defence. Philosophers have spent much time debating and examining whether or not hurting someone is ever justified, for example, in situations where an aggressor means to kill a victim (Ryan 1983). Furthermore, feminist activists have in recent years begun advocating for more focus on shifting the responsibility from rape victims to the perpetrators (which, in almost all cases, has proven to be men (Black *et al.* 2011: 24)), by teaching "boys not to rape" (Kate 2016).

The greatest challenge, then, is evident. How can people "fight back", when they not only think of themselves as "good", but have linked the idea of being "good" to the act of not doing violence? I argue that Roland does this not only through the act of teaching, but through ritual acts.

"I make this conscious decision: Since he is being rude, it is okay for me to be rude back [...] But frankly, I don't push him aside with much determination. I've made the mental choice to be rude, but I haven't been able to muster the physical bluntness the act requires."

Ritual, for the purposes of this essay, will refer to a series of events taking place in a liminal or liminoid space (Turner 1969: 59) where a person passes "from one category to another" (Van Gennep 1903: 189). Here, a liminal space refers to a space detached from the "outside", and, in this particular case, exists in a large conference room of a hotel. Since the "analyses of ritual must describe how participants enact an occasion as ritual through distinctive activities and sequences of these" (Roth 1955: 1), I will give a brief overview of one specific activity we were told to do several times during the self-defence seminar, attempting to explain its significance in the overarching purpose of the ritual as a whole.

Play

"Anything you've been trained in, you've been judged at," Roland said during our Skype interview. "And that judging tends to have done more damage than the training did good. You have to be very careful. A lot of people don't need training, they just need to be woken up a bit."

Every time Roland would demonstrate a technique during the seminar, he would tell us to go practice it ourselves by using the same two words: "Go play."

He placed strong emphasis on the fact that he was not teaching a curriculum, not training us like a martial art 'sensei' would. Instead, he was simply presenting us with techniques and encouraging us to test them out for ourselves to figure out whether or not these techniques worked for us. He even encouraged us to improvise techniques and moves of our own. As Sutton-Smith argues, "play is the learning of variability" (1972: 25), and since Roland defines fighting as

"high-speed problem-solving", play, to him, encourages that mind-set – and also encourages us to simply have fun and not bother with what you look like from the outside.

There is one game in particular that we kept going back to throughout the seminar: "One Step". This is a two-person simulated fight in slow-motion, where each person gets to perform one "move" at a time. For example, Person A throws a punch (very slowly) and Person B, by pretending that the hit is real, moves their head. Person B then grabs Person A's hair, Person A reacts… this goes on until someone gives up. Roland is adamant about not "practicing dying" but does acknowledge that students sometimes need a time out.

We played One Step several times. It was also the first and last game we were told to play.

The first time we tried it, the fights were awkward, and there was a lot of nervous laughter. A lot of pauses, a lot of "so, what's your name? oh, you're from…? hmm I guess I'll just go for your groin now, is that okay?". The second time we played, the awkwardness was replaced by determination. Having learnt new useful techniques, we managed to find leverage points and react to each other in more ways than simply dodging. The third time we played, one person in each pairing received a blind-fold.

"When you're in your animal brain, for lack of a better word, you just perceive," Roland explained to me. "You see, smell, hear stuff. You're trying to understand something. For example: 'I'm thirsty.' That's a sensation that you've named. The next level up, you do something about it. 'I'm thirsty, I'm gonna drink water.' And it slows you down a little bit and it adds a level of removal from life. Next level up you tie it into previous experience: 'I'm thirsty, but I don't know if the water here is safe to drink.' The last level is when you start thinking: 'What will people say?'"

The blind-folds brought the students to that first cognitive level, which Roland would consider to be a "true" perception of reality removed from society or social expectations. Your body simply perceives on a basic sensory level removed from any conscious intellectual input. And that, according to Roland, makes you not only a quick and efficient fighter, but brings you closer to your real self.

"I try not to think in words," he told me. "Most of the words in your head are not you anyway, they're a shallow projection of what's going on, like a computer screen."

Shallowness, here, is equated to modernity (Bauman 2000); a detachment from the biological, physical world, which Roland equates to life. Roland is attempting to bring his students back to life, almost like a rebirth. He wants them to reconnect to their bodies by growing more aware of their capabilities and bring them deeper into their own minds in order to become one with their natural, "animal" brain, which, according to Roland, is untainted by culture or society. In other words: the part of them that enjoys fighting, and not the person that is simply performing or conforming to a social role and, by extension, any particular image they may have of themselves.

During our interview, Roland also told me a story of this young university student who in the matter of just a few hours could take down a Nidan (2nd Dan) black belt in Aikido.

"She let herself get into the part of her brain that's like 'this is about play, this is about hurting people, not getting things right.' So instead of thinking of any techniques,

she was just looking at the situation and opportunities in front of her. She's the perfect poster-child for this kind of training. Wish I'd filmed it. Again, it's nature."

Despite none of us getting it that quickly, the training approach did succeed in making us relax. The nervous laughs from the beginning of the seminar were soon replaced by hearty laughter, and the air felt electric and energised. Like Roland had said, there was nothing we could do wrong.

It can be argued that here, play represents chaos and disorder, whereas society represents order (Sutton-Smith 1972). It can also be seen as simultaneously representing the opposite of that, namely anti-chaos, since the seminar is a safe space where there is an attempt to control the "real" dangers of the outside world.

Staying Strong

The second lesson Roland wanted to teach was that fighting, as well as being fun, it could also be safe. None of the techniques we practiced for this particular seminar involved us getting into any material danger; they simply allow us to learn about both our minds and bodies.

Roland argues that since there is a prevailing stigma against violence it has become a taboo, something that is deemed "unsafe" to even talk about in wider society; it is associated only with pain and breaking the law. Therefore, a controlled environment where fantasy, safety and fighting go hand-in-hand are vital when attempting to disassociate violence from its negative connotations.

"The good guys use violence to get what they need," Roland explains. "The bad guys use violence to get what they want." But at the end of the day, "Violence is just another way of saying 'no'."

Defining it as such leads to a further discussion about agency, which, according to Roland, is the ability to make choices about your own life and other lives. In Roland's view, that's what makes you powerful. This includes not accepting it when someone attacks you and attempts to take that power away. This transforms violence from a terrible offence to a tool that can be used in self-defence and becomes another way of staying safe (Roland argues that self-defence should be taught to children at schools and that it is as important as first-aid training). And if power is choice, true strength – the kind of strength that "the bad guys" will never have – manifests itself when we allow others to have power of their own without feeling threatened or feeling the need to take some of that power or agency away. Here, the dichotomy between victim and aggressor is subverted.

Staying Safe

Accidents happen when practicing the use of violence, and one student sprained their knee during the last hour of the first day. Another student got a concussion.

"We had two injuries yesterday," Roland said to us during the next security briefing the following day. "That is unacceptable."

He told us to take care of each other, because the more injuries we get during training, the less leverage we would have out in the real world against a possible threat. This further emphasises that the separation between the perceived "real world" and the liminal space of the seminar, is not clearly defined. This is despite Roland's attempts to create a safe space where he can, simply by saying "make safe!", actually keep us from harm.

Anti-Structure

If the seminar can represent both chaos

and anti-chaos (Sutton-Smith 1972), then perhaps there is room to further analyse its ritualistic elements through an anti-structural lens (Turner 1974: 60; Sutton-Smith 1972: 25). Anti-structure, here, is meant to be similar to a provocation or rejection of societal order (Douglas 1966). At the seminar, the rejection of societal order manifested itself through play between adults who are neither aggressors nor victims, but simply students acting out violent scenarios and finding ways of surviving them. Sutton-Smith points out that this act of distancing by using a separate, controlled environment for training, is necessary "before one would envisage potential alternatives" (Sutton-Smith 1972: 25) to the societal system and taken-for-granted assumptions within that paradigm. It is the act of playing and fantasising that keeps the students in a "flexible state with respect to that system, and, therefore, with respect to possible changes" (*ibid.*). Therefore, the self-defence seminar I went to can be considered a breeding ground for potential social change.

"I've decided," Roland told me at the end of our Skype interview, "to quit pretending I'm human."

Turner (1974) expands this discussion by arguing that any teaching environment is a potentially ritualised space, since students are in an "intellectually liminal" situation and beyond the normative social structure. This weakens them, since they have no right over others, but also liberates them from their normative social responsibilities and identities (*ibid.*: 59). In ethnographic examples presented by Turner, students are frequently compared to animals or ghosts within their communities. However, Roland and his fellow self-defence instructors embrace the symbol of the "other" themselves, having given one another superhero and villain code-names, and in doing so establishing a strong sense of communitas (Turner 1969) between themselves, and in opposition to wider society.

Conclusion

I will begin this section with a few reflections. As a participant at the seminar, I saw Roland as a teacher, and perhaps the dynamic that arose from that asymmetrical relationship kept me from observing his behaviour and interpreting his statements from a more critical point of view.

Furthermore, for the sake of clarity and to keep a red thread throughout this article, apart from analysing Roland's intent as an instructor, I decided to focus on a single activity (One Step) . In order to make a more holistic depiction of this ethnographic encounter, I could have included a section about my own experience as a participant, maybe with thoughts on whether or not I had had any "sense" of ritual in my own body (Bell 2009 [1992]) throughout.

More importantly, I could have asked for the thoughts and feelings of the other participants, as well as mentioned my own observations in regard to any potential "transformation" they may or may not have undergone. This would have resulted in a more critical engagement with wider anthropological discussions about the legitimacy of the very concept of "ritual".

"The police, the lawyers, the judge the state, the legal system even he, the criminal, the rapist, thought he deserved decades in jail for what he'd done to me. Why didn't I?"

The self-defence seminar was, in essence, about "killing the angel in the house" (Woolf 1931). The angel in the house is a term from Victorian times and refers to the perfect wife or woman who is submissive, polite and always willing to please. It was first coined by Coventry Patmore in his popular

narrative poem, The Angel in the House (1854), which he wrote to praise his wife, Emily. It is this angel that is referenced in the title of Debra Anne Davis' article, Betrayed By the Angel, which Roland recommended I read. It was also previously referenced by Virginia Woolf in 1931 as something that needs to be "killed" as a concept for the sake of women's liberation.

Roland takes this further: he aims to kill this angel in everyone to avoid anyone from being in a similar situation as Davis, who did not fight back against her attacker for the sake of being "polite" and "good". Instead, he embraces the symbol of the superhero, as depicted in the meme shown in the Introduction, and he encouraged the participants of his self-defence seminar to do the same. This was done by making our bodies undergo a ritualised process (Bell 2009 [1992]) through play and the transfer of power, as highlighted by Roland's efforts to "lower the status". The self-defence seminar was about teaching us not to be polite, and that violence is not inherently evil, which illustrates the anti-structural component of this particular "ritual" (Turner 1974: 60; Sutton-Smith 1972: 25).

First and foremost, however, the seminar promoted the idea that people are worth fighting for; it not only gave us the tools and techniques to fight effectively, but also the comfort, will and confidence to perform acts of violence (in self-defence).

NOTES

1. His name has been altered.
2. Some transcriptions have been simplified for clarity.

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